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ABSTRACT

This document indicates general characteristics of excellence in Master's Degree Programs. Areas of concern include types of programs and degrees, control, faculty, students, structure, resources, costs, off-campus programs, interinstitutional programs and certificate programs. (MJM)

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# THE MASTER'S DEGREE

A master's degree should attest the completion of a coherent program of specialized study beyond and resting upon the baccalaureate, under the direction of scholars who are in full command of the subject.

Institutions which have the faculty and resources to offer such work in several related fields without impairment of their undergraduate programs are well advised to do so. Others are not. An institution's prestige and usefulness are determined more by the quality than by the diversity or academic level of its services.

## Types of Programs and Degrees

Master's degree programs are identifiable by their primary objectives as belonging to one or the other of two general types. The immediate purpose of one type is advanced study in a particular discipline. The immediate purpose of the other is the application and extension of previous studies to professional or vocational ends. It is important to distinguish between them, for the two kinds have differing requirements and in many particulars are not comparable.

a. A master's degree program of the first type centers in advanced studies in an academic discipline, as, for example, history, physics, and musicology. The objective is knowledge of the subject rather than its application to professional use. Although the program may be complete in itself, it may also be designed as a preparation for doctoral studies. Award of such a master's degree should express the judgment of the faculty that the recipient has an appropriate background for doctoral study in the field, but not necessarily that he has the potential for successfully completing it.

   The Middle States Commission considers Master of Arts and Master of Science degrees without specific designation of discipline appropriate for only this type of program.

b. A master's program of the second type is professionally or vocationally oriented, as normally it would be in engineering, for example, or in law, applied music, teaching, or in a discipline in preparation for teaching. While such a program should be complete in itself, it may also prepare for doctoral study in a professional field. The degree should indicate that in the judgment of the faculty the recipient has attained specialized competence which qualifies him for superior performance or for teaching in a particular area.

   The Middle States Commission considers only specialized degrees, such as Master of Business Administration, Master of Arts in Education, Master of Engineering, or Master of Arts in Teaching appropriate for this type of program. The Commission favors the use of standard degree terminology.

## Control

Graduate instruction needs its own organization and administration, and conditions which favor consistent, long range development. Educational policy and degree requirements should be a faculty responsibility.

## Faculty

Faculty members who have instructional or counseling responsibility in master's degree programs should hold academic qualifications beyond the level of that program or unassailable compensating qualifications, should be productive contributors in the field of their own specialty and participants in its professional life, and should be permitted to work under conditions and loads which encourage them to continue developing professionally.

Counseling and personal instruction are time-consuming aspects of graduate teaching. So are the con-

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tinuous study and professional experience in the teacher's field which good scholarship requires, with periodic leaves to intensify them.

Very small departments ought rarely undertake master's work. Several instructors with complementary specializations are needed to provide differing points of view and a variety of offerings, and to aid in supervising and examining the students. It is desirable, for the same reasons, that master's work should be available simultaneously in several related departments rather than in one alone.

### Students

Admission to graduate study should require evidence that the applicant has the ability, preparation, aptitudes, and skills which are needed for successful work in the program he desires to undertake. Advancement to degree candidacy should be a second step, carefully considered and based on the student's actual performance in the program.

Command of appropriate scholarly tools, such as languages or statistics, should be expected early, so that the student may use them during most of his work.

### Structure

Master's degree programs need not conform to any fixed pattern. The requirements for a degree should be governed by its objectives, taking into account the principles that:

a. A candidate's work should be planned as a whole, with sequence and focus aimed at objectives which have been defined in advance. It must not be simply an aggregate of available courses.

b. A substantial proportion of the courses acceptable toward the master's degree should be designed explicitly for graduate students, although properly qualified undergraduates need not be excluded from them. Undergraduate introductory courses in the principle field should not be counted toward the master's degree. Introductory courses in ancillary fields may be acceptable if they are pertinent to the program's objectives; any use of undergraduate courses for graduate students, however, must be carefully justified and controlled.

c. The decisive factors in qualifying for a master's degree should be the quality of a student's performance and the level of his achievement; the time spent or number of credits accumulated are of less importance. The number of courses or credits required of individual candidates may vary, depending upon their preparation and objectives. Some period of full-time study is desirable.

Bachelor's and master's degrees may be conferred together if each is earned under proper conditions.

d. It is important to ensure depth and perspective in the program as a whole. Comprehensive examinations, theses, and a variety of special projects can help do so.

A comprehensive examination is not based principally upon the courses a candidate has taken, but upon the knowledge and skills he is expected to have in the field concerned, however obtained. An independent project can provide an opportunity for the student to master a segment of his subject on his own, and to express his mastery in lucid terms. The form of the project will depend upon the nature of the field; it might be, for example, a thesis, a series of demonstrations, or an artistic or professional creation or performance. It should be a principal feature in the degree requirements, critically evaluated.

### Resources

Library, laboratory, and other educational facilities for a master's degree program should be of a quality judged satisfactory by established scholars in the field and fully accessible to the students.

Graduate study, even more than undergraduate, is dependent upon the library. Graduate work requires substantially richer resources. Not only must the advanced courses be supported with a greater number and more specialized kinds of books, monographs, source materials, periodicals, and reference works in the fields of instruction and related areas, but the background material for many special investigations will be demanded too. Lack of superior library resources or failure to use them well condemns a program to mediocrity.

### Costs

Master's degree work is expensive. A governing board needs complete and realistic financial information not only before authorizing a graduate program, but also continuously thereafter in sustaining it. Fees for master's work are unlikely to cover its cost if desirable teaching loads and class size are to be maintained; especially is this so if expensive equipment is required. Salary and library budgets are markedly increased.

Superior colleges and professional schools often should offer master's degree work in order to make the best use of their resources, to attract the kind of faculty they want, and to strengthen their undergraduate programs. Institutions of anything less than superior strength should not undertake it.

### Off-campus Programs

Master's work off-campus presents formidable difficulties, for the instruction and resources offered graduate students in extension courses should be educationally equal to those enjoyed by resident students in similar courses.

One safeguard for the quality of off-campus courses is to have them set up, controlled, and supervised through the same departmental, faculty, and administrative channels as other courses, and taught as part of normal faculty loads. Assigning graduate extension courses as additional work for extra pay is indefensible in any but exceptional and temporary circumstances. The use of part-time instructors needs to be justified on educational grounds, and their qualifications should be comparable to those of the fulltime staff.

If extension graduate courses are to require the same preparation as their campus counterparts, as they should, superior library resources must be available for extension students at times and in places which favor their use. It is not sufficient to bring books from the campus collection, to depend on local public libraries, or to expect extension students to travel to the campus library when the course itself has to be brought to them.

### Interinstitutional Programs

Consortiums and cooperative programs among institutions are particularly desirable in master's work. The Commission warmly encourages them.

### Certificate Programs

Fifth year programs leading to certificates are often useful, parallelling master's degree programs. They will serve some students better and help the institution maintain the controls essential for reputable master's work.

Such programs can encourage experienced school teachers to keep abreast of their subjects, to learn new methods, or to enter specialized fields. If they are taught by qualified instructors in well-designed sequence, the institution should urge local and state authorities, as the Middle States Commission does, to accept them for professional advancement, certification, and salary increments.

NOTE: This is one of a series of documents published by the Commission on Higher Education. While each document may be used separately, each should also be viewed in relationship to the document entitled Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education. A current list of publications is available from the Commission's office.

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